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NATIONAL FEDERATION OF CHURCHES AND CHRISTIAN WORKERS
90 BIBLE HOUSE
(Fourth Avenue and Ninth Street),
NEW YORK CITY

CHURCH FEDERATION

ITS NATURE AND FUNCTION

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Federation of the churches rests fundamentally upon the great fact that all Christians are one in Christ. This is not merely a doctrine of faith, it is a fact of life; if in Christ, then of necessity members one of another. By virtue of the union to the one Lord, through the one faith, as declared in the one baptism, all Christians are brethren, of the same family, fellow members of the body of Christ. This unity may be denied; it cannot be destroyed. The brother in the flesh may be disowned and cast out, but his relation as brother cannot thereby be annihilated; he is a brother still. The same is true of this spiritual brotherhood. Christian unity is then not an ideal to be striven for, but a fact to be manifested. The relation exists; it should be given proper expression; it must be confessed before men. Along with this fundamental unity it is being increasingly recognized in these days that all Christians, in spite of their differences, have more things in common than they have separately. The doctrines that are held in common are too the most important, those that separate are the more super-

ficial. And so the past twenty years has witnessed more genuine attempts to reunite the scattered flocks of Protestantism than all the centuries since the Reformation. This movement toward union is of vast significance and is worthy of most careful study.

Coincident with this rise of the spirit of unity, due to the recognition of essential oneness, there has come to the churches a new sense of the economic waste of division and of the practical necessity of co-operation if the work of winning the world is ever to be accomplished. Rivalry which simply meant competition might be tolerated, but rivalry which involved a squandering of resources was not to be borne in an age like this. Moreover, the congestion of population in our cities has brought new conditions of work to the churches. It is no longer possible for the ministry of a place to know all the individuals and their church relations. A canvass made by the Federation of Churches and Christian organizations of New York City discovered that one-fourth of all the Protestant ministers in New York were calling on families connected with their several churches and all living within one area of eighteen blocks, while one-third of all the Protestant families of that same district were without church homes. Nothing can cure such a condition except the co-operation of all, and the thorough organization of the work. Division of labor and combination of workers, these potent principles of the industrial world, must be adopted by the church of Christ if effective work is to be done and economic waste prevented.

Here, then, in the fundamental unity of all Christians in Christ, in the consciousness of brotherhood which has been growing in the last quarter of the century, in an appreciation of the new conditions of modern life, and the new principles of modern industry—in these the Federation of the churches finds its ground.

But Federation is only one of many attempts to secure the same ends. People have sought to manifest this unity of the church in many ways. First, through a fraternal recognition and fellowship with all Christians of whatever name. This is daily growing in range and heartiness of expression. Again in manifold forms of co-operation, although such forms are usually spasmodic and temporary. Many have further proposed the organic union of all churches under one great administrative organization, manifesting the unity of the body of Christ through a governmental control of each part by and for the whole. But varied as have been the schemes proposed and the platforms presented, there has been almost no fruit from all these attractive schemes. One form of Federation has been more successful. Denominations having a similar doctrine and polity have formed alliances in order to promote mutual understanding and comity in benevolent work. Such are the Pan-Anglican Alliance, the Pan-Methodist Conference, and, largest of all, the Pan-Presbyterian Alliance, which, in its recent meeting at Washington, included representatives from eighty denominations having a Presbyterian polity. This form of permanent fellowship has been aptly described by Dr. Josiah Strong as

"Federation at the top," because the chief Assemblies or Synods of the various denominations appoint delegates to represent them at the meetings of the Alliance. A modification of this in a small area is found in organizations like the Interdenominational Commission of Maine. That is comity and co-operation within the State limits, but it is a union of denominations of such through their representatives.

Distinguished from all these methods of manifesting the unity of the church is the local Federation of Churches—in Dr. Strong's phrase "Federation at the bottom," a federation not of denominations, but of individual churches. This is a permanent union of all the local churches in a given area for the accomplishment of common ends. One of its chief advantages is that it is independent of all denominational complications. The barriers of creed and practice are simply ignored. As Christians in the same community and equally feeling the burden of promoting righteousness in the social life, and of bringing the message of the Gospel to all the souls in the community, as brethren of the same Master, soldiers in the same army, members of the same body of Christ, though gathered into separate groups for worship and work, all recognize the need of working together and of dividing with others a work which is too great for any one or for any one group. Instead of trying to minimize differences and overlook essential divergencies, these are frankly confessed and then treated as irrelevant to the purpose in hand. Being a union not on the basis of doctrine but of service, a union not

for government but for evangelization, all distinctions are pushed down and out of sight.

Denominational differences indeed are not to be despised as of no importance. They spring out of conscientious adherence to certain doctrinal beliefs. The things that separate, while not so fundamental as the things that unite, are yet matters of faith. In the last analysis it is always loyalty to the truth as seen that causes one denomination to maintain itself as distinct from another. These distinctions are therefore not to be overthrown lightly. It may be that all varieties are needed in order that the white light of truth may be seen in its clearness by the blending of the many hues of denominational assertion. Any attempt to unite these denominations which involves the giving up of the things for which each denomination peculiarly stands is therefore practically hopeless if not undesirable. But underneath these differences there is the fundamental unity which must also find expression, and outside of all denominations is the mass of the unchurched to whom the common Gospel needs first to be presented before the denominational points can be understood. The local Federation furnishes a method by which this unity may be expressed without destruction of the denominational peculiarities; and a means of accomplishing the common work by a sensible and effective cooperation. The church entering the Federation does not lay aside any of the denominational affiliations or obligations, it simply undertakes with other Christian churches of its own neighborhood to do the work of Christ more efficiently.

While thus drawing all the churches of a given community together for a permanent co-operation and the correlation of their activities, while expressing the essential unity of all Christians in those churches, the Federation does not erect a new denomination; the union is local, it is for service; it establishes no authority over any church, all service is freely undertaken, no compulsion is possible in any case. The work of all is systematized, but not controlled.

As already hinted, the work of the Federation follows two main lines or falls into two chief departments. The most fundamental is that of evangelization. How to reach effectively with the Gospel every individual in the community is the problem which presses on the churches. The Federation solves it through the co-operative parish plan. To every church a given geographical area for which it shall be responsible—that is the watchword. This does not mean, of course, that all the people of that area are assigned to any one church, but simply that this one church agrees to see to it that every individual in that section who does not already have a church home shall have an invitation presented to him to attach himself to some church, not of necessity the church of that district, but the church of his own choice. The invitation is an invitation to the church of Christ, not to any one branch of it. Herein is the co-operation. The church of the district reports to other churches those whom it finds with preferences for others. It will receive like reports from other districts. There is no way in which every soul can surely be reached

in our cities except by such a geographical division of the territory into parishes, and the assignment of each parish to one particular church. That this plan requires a considerable degree of Christian fraternity is admitted; that such a degree is now existent in most of the churches is, however, believed.

The other chief department of the work of the Federation will be along the line of civic reform. The Christian forces of the city are disorganized and at a great disadvantage in any conflict with the forces of evil. The saloon is organized, and has its influence in politics; the church is not organized, and has practically no influence in politics. Bad men in office advance evil ends. Good men in office have no backing in their attempts to promote good ends. The cause of righteousness in all our cities waits for the consolidation of the Christian forces of the city and for some recognized instrumentality for expressing the united Christian sentiment of the community in regard to all moral issues. The history of the Federation movement in England, as well as the initial efforts of some in this country, furnish a striking promise of what may be accomplished along these lines by a well-organized and well-supported Federation.

The Federation of the Churches is no patent scheme for working miracles. Of itself it will not straightway inaugurate the millennium. But of all attempts to express the unity of the Christian church it is the most hopeful, of all cooperative measures it has been most effective, of all instruments for evangelization and reform it

has proved by far the most successful. The wonderful growth of the movement in England in the past decade, its slower but accelerating growth in this country, in Australia and New Zealand, the results already attained, and the promise of future conquests which is in it, mark it as the most significant religious movement since the Reformation. The world will wait long for the disappearance of all denominational divisions and the welding of all Christians into one great external organization. The organic union of Christendom is still a dream. But if there shall come the day, which seems not far away, when in all cities and towns of this and other lands the churches are bound into local federations, then we believe the prayer of our Lord will find its answer in the oneness of His disciples, a oneness so manifested to the world that all shall believe in His divine mission and give Him glory.